



## Abbott and Costello Masters of Slapstick

BY WAYNE KLATT

ABBOTT: How stupid can you be?

COSTELLO: How stupid do you want me to be?

At the time they said this, in *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy*, Costello had lost weight for his health and had modified his piping voice, and Abbott had gained weight from middle age, and so there was little physical difference between them. The relationship was still the same as when they had made their first film, *One Night in the Tropics*, 15 years before. But this time they tried something new — Abbott took his share of slapstick. He falls from the sky and into a cart, he gets hit with a camera, he is pushed through a ceiling, and he falls off a camel. Yet none of this gets a laugh because we never see his reactions, and that was what Costello was all about.

It's hard to understand how a vaudeville team could be so wildly successful without knowing the nature of moviegoers just before and during World War II. Universal, without the star power or top writers of rival studios, was cranking out frothy romantic comedies so that women could immerse themselves in glamour. Take *One Night in the Tropics* (1940), with sometimes witty dialogue and a plot guaranteed to end happily. The original script would not have made the kind of movie males

could sit through with much attention, but then the studio decided to introduce a chubby short guy and a taller man with a growling voice.

Bud Abbott and Lou Costello got as far as they did only because they were the visible members of a comedy team. The unsung third member was gag writer John Grant, who had served them well in burlesque and wrote comedy routines in most of their films.

Grant had a canny knack for knowing what would work best for the odd pairing of a sweet guy and a selfish guy who happens to be his only friend. "They weren't innovators," said Bud's nephew, Norman Abbott. "Abbott and Costello were flat-out joke men. They took existing material and did it better than anyone else." Like all burlesque house writers, Grant sometimes stole routines outright ("Slowwwly I turn..."), but usually invented or vastly improved others.

Costello, originally Cristillo, had wanted to be a heart throb (he had Irish-Italian good looks as a teenager) but, let's face it, his height and eventually his shape predestined him to be a comedian. In fact his weight, most of it put on in the late 1930s, hid the fact that he was an agile athlete, so that we are continually surprised by the stunts he could pull off. There was no trick photography in *Here Come the Co-Eds* (1945). Lou really did all those basketball shots.

He evolved into the character of a grown-up boy in 1938, two years before the team's

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*Wayne Klatt is an editor at the City News Service of the Chicago Tribune and a free-lance writer.*

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*The Kate Smith Hour (1938)*  
 Kate Smith laughs uproariously at Bud Abbott and Lou Costello

movie debut, when they were replacements for one-liner comedian Henny Youngman on the *Kate Smith Hour* radio program. When the producer complained that listeners wouldn't be able to tell their voices apart, Lou raised his a touch and added an endearing whine. Suddenly he seemed like a child being picked on by a bully or an older brother. What made this mistreatment funny was that his character usually thought he deserved it.

Bud and Lou would step up to the radio microphone cold, without a script, and just do a routine for five minutes. For the first time, people on farms and in small towns heard burlesque comedy and thought it was wonderful. When "the boys" said they had run out of material one night, they received last-minute permission to perform the one routine the producer had thought would never go over. It was called "Who's On First."

With Kate Smith at last trouncing the Rudy Vallee program in the ratings, Bud and Lou went from \$350 a week to \$1,250. They knew they were ready for Hollywood.

In later years Lou became hardened but his heart was shown early on when he saw that scenes involving the star of *One Night in the Tropics*, Allan Jones, had been cut to make room for Bud and Lou routines. "That bothers me because he's a nice guy," said Lou. How many stars would say that?

Their "overnight success" was many years in the making.

Bud (William) Abbott was born in 1895 in an Atlantic City tent — his father was a circus promoter and his mother was an elephant rider. He dropped out of school after eighth grade. At 15 he signed up as a cabin boy, according to one account, or, according to another, was Mickey Finned and shanghaied on a freighter on its way to Norway. However he got there, he was forced to shovel coal for meals. Returning to America, Bud grew up introverted and shy and entered vaudeville comedy without a capacity for being funny.

After playing straight man for his wife, Betty, in the 1920s he developed a nattily dressed suavity, the opposite of what he was in real life. And so rather than his be-

ing boss, it was Lou who made all the decisions for the team and stood up to the producers and directors.

Lou was born in 1906 in that hotbed of show business talent, New Jersey. His early jobs ran from newsboy to prizefighter (honest). As a young man, Lou took \$2900 his father had withdrawn from his life's savings and hitchhiked to Hollywood. He barely made a living doing stunt work (in 1928 doubling for beautiful Dolores Del Rio!). Disillusioned in his dreams of becoming a movie star, he returned East and was hired as a Dutch (German) comedian in burlesque. He teamed up with Abbott in 1936 when they both needed a new partner. Without that coincidence, both no doubt would soon be obscure and burlesque comedy would have died a lot sooner.

It's hard to realize, but for most of their careers Abbott was receiving 60 per cent of the profits. That's how much the contributions of straight men were appreciated in burlesque and vaudeville. Indeed, Lou was funny almost entirely because Bud wasn't. Abbott's talent is easy to overlook, but he was appreciated as the best in the business by Groucho Marx and Mel Brooks.

Their first movie was soon forgotten, but

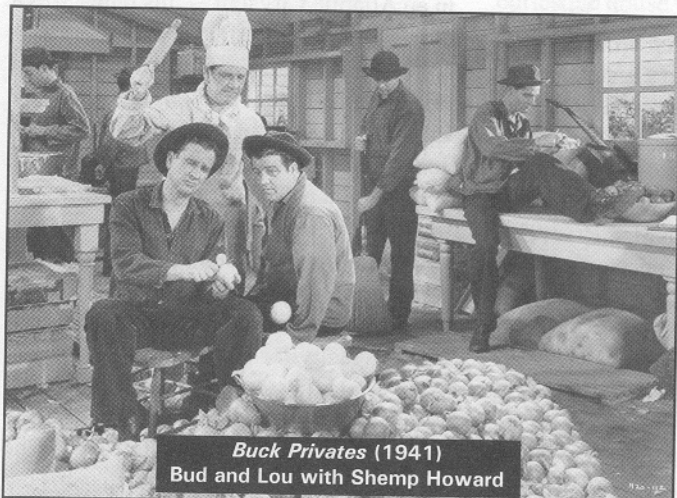
not the team. Although still in financial straits, Universal decided to risk giving the team their own feature, *Buck Privates*. Since "the boys'" specialty was verbal humor, they found ways of using slapstick to make the movie more visual, with the agile Costello always the "fall guy." When the writers couldn't think of enough gags, Bud and Lou took an hour break and devised the hilarious close-order drill scene by themselves.

Lou also quickly learned that with wrong-headed studio bosses, you had to fight for anything you wanted. As Maxine Andrews of the Andrews Sisters recalled, "he didn't fight only for himself — he fought for everybody involved."

The studio wouldn't even pay to have the Andrews Sisters learn their dance steps for what would be their megahit, "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B," so they had to practice on their own time at night. The sisters also paid a song publisher \$200 from their own pocket so that "Apple Blossom Time" could be included when the studio wouldn't pay.

The film, made in 20 days including musical numbers, turned a \$180,000 budget into a \$4.7 million blockbuster. One reason was its timeliness: the quickie was

released just five months after the draft bill was passed. Another was that women loved it. Most women did not care for low comedy, which they regarded as common or even cruel. (Men liked Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton more than women did, and women tended to be indifferent to the Marx Brothers.)



*Buck Privates* (1941)  
Bud and Lou with Shemp Howard

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Lou, in fact, was the first movie comedian that women actually felt comfortable with, as if he were their son or kid brother. His character had an indomitable spirit. Although he could be embarrassed or disappointed, he was never spiteful or unrealistically ambitious. His character was someone women felt they could have fun being with, yet Lou the actor also was recognized as a great clown by none other than his idol, Charlie Chaplin.

“The boys” were given no chance to appreciate their fame. The studio rushed them into two movies, *Hold That Ghost* (there is no ghost in it) and *In the Navy*. In *Ghost*, Lou found his best female partner in Joan Davis as a professional radio screamer. But to cash in on the popularity of *Buck Privates*, the studio released the song-studded *In the Navy* first. And so two of the team’s best films hit the screens less than two months apart in 1941.

One of the writers of *Hold That Ghost*, Robert Lees, said that when he and his partner Frederic Rinaldo saw the film in the loneliness of the projector room, “we were almost so upset that we considered taking our names off it... But when we saw the picture with an audience, we were rolling in the aisles along with everybody else. You see, it was all in the timing.” The film could have been called “Abbott and Costello Save Universal.”

This inability for screenwriters to understand the logic and timing of burlesque routines was why Abbott and Costello relied on John Grant. Audiences could always tell when his talents were missing. Grant could not save some films, but without him there is no chemistry between the two men. (Grant is missing from the credits for *Rio Rita*, *Abbott and Costello in Hollywood*,



Who Done It? (1942)

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*Little Giant*, *Africa Screams*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Lost in Alaska* and *Dance with Me, Henry*.

Studio heads, acting as rashly as Bud and Lou characters, decided to squeeze every cent of profit they could from the team, forcing them into substandard quickies, *Keep 'Em Flying* released just four months after *Hold That Ghost* and *Ride 'Em Cowboy*, then lent them to MGM for the forgettable *Rio Rita* (1942).

That same year “the boys” starred in a film comedy set in a radio station, *Who Done It?* and started their own radio show and kept on even after Lou had a bout with rheumatic fever. On the afternoon of November 2, 1943, his first day back to work, Lou’s sister called during a radio rehearsal and told him that his 11-month-old son had toddled into the swimming pool behind his home and drowned.

Lou raced home, but an hour before air-time he called NBC and said he would be able to make the show. Comic voice-man Mel Blanc, who was in the cast that week, believed Costello decided to go on only because that morning he had asked his wife, Anne, to keep Butch up at the radio to see if the little boy could recognize his daddy’s voice. The audience had no way of telling that the greatest tragedy of Lou’s life had

just occurred. Blanc, guest star Lana Turner, and the studio audience saw Lou break down and cry as soon as the script ended.

Bud gestured for the engineer to keep the microphone on and explained what had happened. He ended by saying, "There is nothing more that I can say except that I know all of you join me in expressing our deepest sympathy to a great trouper. Good night."

As a friend recalled, "The baby's death knocked the hell out of Lou... he was zapped of all inner life and purpose to go on." Costello's relationship grew even warmer with all children, including his daughters Carole and Paddy, and later his third girl, Chris.

Costello remained convincingly naive on screen, but now that he was realizing the cost he was growing bitter over how he and Bud were being exploited by Universal. As he would tell his frequent stunt man, Vic Parks, "Don't let [them] get you down."

Bud took to drinking between "shoots" to keep up with the demands, although alcohol never seriously interfered with his work. His discomfort around people was worsened by his epilepsy. When they were performing on stage and Lou sensed his partner was going into a seizure, the little guy found a way to hit him funny, helping his partner snap out of it, and then they finished the act quickly.

The team's low point in the decade might have been *In Society* (1944), despite a hilarious sight gag involving a bathtub. The "big scene" at the end just had shots



**Abbott and Costello Show (NBC 1942-47)**

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of Lou spliced into footage from the fire truck chase in the W. C. Fields film *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break*.

As always, Bud and Lou "relaxed" between shoots with poker games they played on the set or in their trailers with invited friends. Poker was the curse of vaudeville, since it was an obsession born of long train rides. Now and then "the boys" would delay shooting a scene or have someone withdraw \$10,000 from a bank so they could continue their hand. Often the team would joke around the set until Lou would say "time to get serious," meaning time to be funny on camera, which was always harder work than any non-comedian can understand.

Not only did Abbott and Costello films keep coming, after each new picture Universal would release previous ones, meaning that second-run movie houses were never more than a few weeks without Bud and Lou. With the war winding down, and audiences more prepared for serious entertainment, they were seen somewhat as has-beens, all the more because they were repeating their comic routines.

In 1946, someone had the idea of separating Bud from Lou while keeping their

screen personalities. This flopped in *Little Giant* but clicked with the delightful *The Time of Their Lives*, released five months later. *Lives* not only had a solid story, it was directed by Charles Barton, who alone understood the charm of Lou's little-boy act. Barton used an extra camera in every scene to make sure he recorded all of Lou's reactions. The fun-loving Barton, who looked like a tavern bouncer, became a personal friend of Lou and went on to direct their next seven films.

Some of the maturity of *Lives* remained in the now-overlooked *Buck Privates Come Home*, the only film that ever gave my father a belly laugh (when the racing car hydrofoils). Here Bud's abrasiveness is modified to present the boys as the foster fathers of a little French girl.

Then it was back to formula fun until they made *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), the last time moviegoers saw Bela Lugosi as Dracula and Lon Chaney, Jr. as the Wolf Man. With the script doing homage to horror films rather than spoofing them, it was the only one Lou detested. He insisted it was just not funny — unaware of how much his contribution would be. Costello came to like the film only because his beloved mother told him it was the best he ever made. Most fans and critics agree.

Seven months after *The Noose Hangs High*, and just five months before *Meet Frankenstein*, the studio unleashed *Mexican Hayride*, with the boys forced to do what they could with the tatters of a Cole Porter stage extravaganza. Costello trying to dance in drag

lingers in the mind.

The best thing about their next film, *Africa Screams* (1949), was finding Hillary Brooke. On the screen the blonde former model looks beautiful and classy, a natural foil for slapstick. Hillary didn't need the work (she went on to marry an MGM executive) but simply loved the relaxed atmosphere of working in low-budget films and television.

*Africa Screams* has moments but amounts to a misstep. Bud and Lou, this time working without gag writer John Grant, had made what amounts to a kiddie film, so the humor is silly rather than using their clever twists of logic. Notice the improvement when Grant helped them out in *Abbott and Costello Meet the Killer, Boris Karloff*, who is not the killer. The film was released just three months later in 1949.

As the decade ended, so did Abbott and Costello as a creative element in film comedy. From now on they were mainly repeating themselves. They began appearing on television in the *Colgate Comedy Hour* in 1951, and the next year starred in their own half-hour series with Hillary Brooke. (Catch the episode when Lou takes a chimpanzee to the license bureau and discovers



*The Time of Their Lives* (1946)

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rather late that he's getting a marriage license.)

The rest of their movies — despite a few good scenes here and there— were either retreads or aimed at children. As for how such a dignified actor as Charles Laughton could co-star in *Abbott and Costello Meet Captain Kidd* (1952), he was one of their biggest fans.

Lou was prostrated by exhaustion in 1953 but refused to stop working. After rebounding in *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy* (1955), the boys left Universal when the studio refused to raise their salaries for a remake of *Fireman Save My Child*. (Universal needed the money for *Francis the Talking Mule* and *Ma and Pa Kettle* films.) That was an unfortunate decision on everyone's part.

Bud and Lou made one final film together, the painful-to-watch *Dance with Me Henry* (with Abbott for the only time playing a non-Abbott character).

Then they went their separate ways.

Lou starred in *The Thirty Foot Bride of Candy Mountain*, doing his best with a role much too young for him. But he suffered from health problems and died in his home on March 3, 1959. He was 53 years old.

Bud had often quarreled with Lou on minor matters, but now realized how much he missed the man he would call "my little buddy." Later, in 1959, the Internal Revenue Service rejected half a million dollars of Abbott's tax deductions over a seven year period. Bud appeared on television and asked his fans to send him fifty cents or a dollar. Maybe it was a joke as his son later said it was, but Bud's tone was one of



**Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (1948)**

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desperation. In a month, letters with dollar bills were "stacked up all over the house," Bud Jr. said. They amounted to about \$300.

Bud Abbott continued working now and then in nightclubs and dubbing his voice for Abbott and Costello cartoons (by now needing crutches and leg braces to get around) before he died at age 78 on April 24, 1974. The man who estimated he had made six or seven million dollars in his lifetime had been living out his final years on Social Security.

Abbott and Costello, victims of overwork and overexposure, quickly fell out of fashion, but their popularity increases now and then as times change. A clip showing "Who's On First" plays on monitors at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, and a Lou Costello web site has messages from fans as far away as Canada and the United Kingdom.

But the boys will never be appreciated in the same way because there will never again be anything like the 1940s, when a little fat man saying "I'm a baaaad boy" could take people's minds off the tragic world news of the day. ■

*Tune in TWTD August 24 to hear Abbott and Costello in "Buck Privates" on the Lux Radio Theatre.*